



Eight-Step Plan

House conservatives offer a platform.

By David Freddoso

National Review

When the election of 2006 handed Republicans minorities in both the House and Senate for the first time in over a decade, conservatives thought they saw a silver lining in the loss. A party that had drifted from the principles of limited government finally had a chance for some soul-searching — an opportunity to learn its lessons and return to its former ways.

But the Republican reaction to 2006 has not looked much like that. Some Republicans cling to the system of favors and earmarks that failed to preserve their majority in 2006. Others are headed for the exits. Someone needs to find a plan to save the party, and some House conservatives are giving it a go.

So far, [23 Republican House members](#) have announced that they will retire at the end of the term, and many of their seats will be vulnerable this fall. A few others couldn't even wait until this year's end, cashing out instead and entering the lobbying world. Four early Republican resignations (including that of Mississippi senator Trent Lott) were taken in order to circumvent new restrictions on their lobbying activities. These have resulted in a loss of three "safe" Republican House seats in Illinois, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

In front of this grim backdrop, conservative members of the Republican Study Committee (RSC) have devised a plan to save their party's brand. On Tuesday, RSC Chairman Rep. Jeb Hensarling (R., Tex.) [made the case](#) to his colleagues for a set of conservative reforms.

"I don't think there's any way we regain the majority in Congress without once again convincing the American people that we are the party of fiscal responsibility," Hensarling tells *National Review Online*. "We disappointed the people, and that's how we lost the majority."

Hensarling made eight proposals to his colleagues, each representing a return to basic conservative orthodoxy. He does not expect House Republicans to adopt all eight — "Eight is too many," he says — but that even just two or three would be enough to craft the coherent winning message that Republicans have been lacking for more than a year.

“Once you lose three special elections in a row, and you’re seeing some of the worst polling data in years, you need to do something new and bold,” says Hensarling. “We must at least embrace a handful of policy initiatives that are big, that go to our core values as a party, that people care about, and that demonstrate a difference between ourselves and the Democrats.”

The eight proposals will be difficult to achieve legislatively, but all are also politically wise in an election year. They include earmark, welfare, and tax reform; spending limitations; conservative health-care reform; increased oil exploration; renewal of FISA provisions that allow surveillance of terrorists; and a strengthening of parental rights.

Many of these provisions are both popular and uncontroversial within Republican ranks. A bill forbidding the transportation of minors across state lines in order to circumvent parental-notification laws on abortion actually passed the last Congress. Democrats were so embarrassed by their opposition to this law in the last Congress that they allowed it to pass the Senate in 2006, but prevented its final passage with the unusual step of preventing the appointment of conferees to create a common House-Senate version of the bill. The [spending-limit amendment](#) is a sure winner, with Republicans tired of watching government grow under President George W. Bush as it never did under Bill Clinton or other Democratic presidents.

Earmark reform, despite its potential popularity, faces serious opposition among House Republicans; a majority of the caucus reportedly opposes it.

“We don’t have the votes yet in terms of coming to a unified position on earmarks,” acknowledges Rep. Eric Cantor (R., Va.), both a member of the RSC and the House Republican leadership team. “But I know that that’s where we have to be. This is something the public shouldn’t have to accept. The money we’re spending doesn’t grow on trees — it comes from people who worked hard to make that money.”

Hensarling argues that earmarks, despite representing a small portion of the federal budget, hold significance both for lawmakers and voters.

“While a small part of the budget, earmarks are still a very large part of the culture of spending that we have here,” Hensarling says. “And most people don’t understand entitlement spending, but 80 or 90 percent have heard of the ‘Bridge to Nowhere,’ and they don’t like it. The Democratic conference is totally unified in protecting the status quo, behind a system that lets Washington take money out of people’s paychecks so that a Congressman can keep his.”

He also notes that a message of earmark reform would fit nicely with the message of the party’s presidential nominee. “John McCain, says he is going to veto any spending bill that contains even one earmark,” says Hensarling. “I’ll be there to sustain his vetoes, and I hope there are at least 147 other Republicans who will do the same.”

Given the number of Republican retirements, the political climate of 2008, and the six-to-one cash advantage held by the Democratic committee that spends money on House races, this could be a very tough year for Republicans. But a bold message could at least remind Republican voters of why they belong to the GOP in the first place.

“There’s no question that over the last year and a half we’ve been going through a period of contrition,” says Cantor. “Now is the time for us to go out there and demonstrate what it is we’re all about.”

As Hensarling puts it: “We have got to define what that ‘R’ means by our names.”

Editor's Note: This article has been changed since it's original publication.

— *David Freddoso is an NRO staff reporter.*